



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

For Release March 22, 1983

Million 202/343-3171

WETLAND LOSSES "CRITICAL"; SECRETARY WATT ASKS CONGRESS FOR ACTION

Saying that "the need to conserve the Nation's wetlands has never been more critical," Interior Secretary James Watt today submitted to Congress a draft bill entitled the "Protect Our Wetlands and Duck Resources Act of 1983." The bill would prohibit the use of Federal tax dollars under a number of programs to subsidize drainage and development of critical wetlands. The Secretary said he hoped the bill would "serve as a focal point for the Administration, the Congress, State and local governments, and the private sector to cooperate in developing a comprehensive program to encourage the conservation of these valuable resources."

Approximately half of the 215 million wetland acres that once existed in the United States have disappeared and the continued destruction of these areas poses a serious threat to the Nation's environmental and economic well-being, Secretary Watt advised the Congress. A recent Interior Department study indicates current losses total 458,000 acres, or 715 square miles, every year. Over 9 million acres, an area nearly twice the size of New Jersey, were lost in the 20-year period from the 1950's to the 1970's covered by the study.

Secretary Watt said: "Wetlands are among the most productive lands on earth. They serve as critical nurseries for fish and shellfish, provide breeding and wintering grounds for our Nation's migratory bird populations, and support countless other plants and animals. Wetlands contribute to the production of a commercial and recreational fishery harvest valued at several billion dollars annually. They also provide millions of Americans with opportunities for recreational activities, provide natural flood and erosion control, and help to supply the Nation's increasing demand for safe, pure water."

The draft legislation would establish a Protect Our Wetlands and Duck Resources (POWDR) System, comprised of wetlands that provide significant wildlife, fisheries, or water purification benefits. New Federal expenditures or financial assistance for any purpose other than certain specifically excepted activities would be prohibited within the System.

Secretary Watt described this approach as similar to that used to protect undeveloped coastal barriers in the recently enacted Coastal Barrier Resources Act. "It makes little sense" for the Federal Government to conserve wetlands "while Federal tax dollars are also being spent to encourage the draining, filling, and conversion of these areas to other uses." The Secretary said the bill "would not prohibit property owners from building on their property and it would not impose federally mandated duties on State or local governments. Instead, it advances the common sense approach that the destruction of these resource areas important to all Americans should not be underwritten and encouraged with Federal tax dollars."

(more)

About 8.2 million wetland acres are under Federal or State protection in the lower 48 States, Secretary Watt noted. The remaining 86.8 million acres are in private ownership.

Other provisions of the bill would bolster current Federal and State wetland protection programs by:

--Amending the Land and Water Conservation Fund to authorize grants to States for wetlands conservation. The proposed grants would be in an amount equal to three times the amount of a given State's annual "Duck Stamp" (or similar stamp) revenues dedicated to wetlands conservation.

--Extending the Wetlands Loan Act (due to expire September 30, 1983) for 10 years and forgiving repayment of advances made under that Act. This would permit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to continue using revenues from sales of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (Federal "Duck Stamp") for acquisition of critical migratory bird habitat. Unless amended, the Wetlands Loan Act would require that 75 percent of revenues from Duck Stamp sales be applied toward retiring the \$147 million advanced so far from the \$200 million authorized under the Act, beginning October 1983.

--Increasing revenues in the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund by authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to require a valid Federal Duck Stamp or single visit permit for entrance into certain designated units of the National Wildlife Refuge System; and increasing the price of the Federal Duck Stamp from \$7.50 to \$15.00.

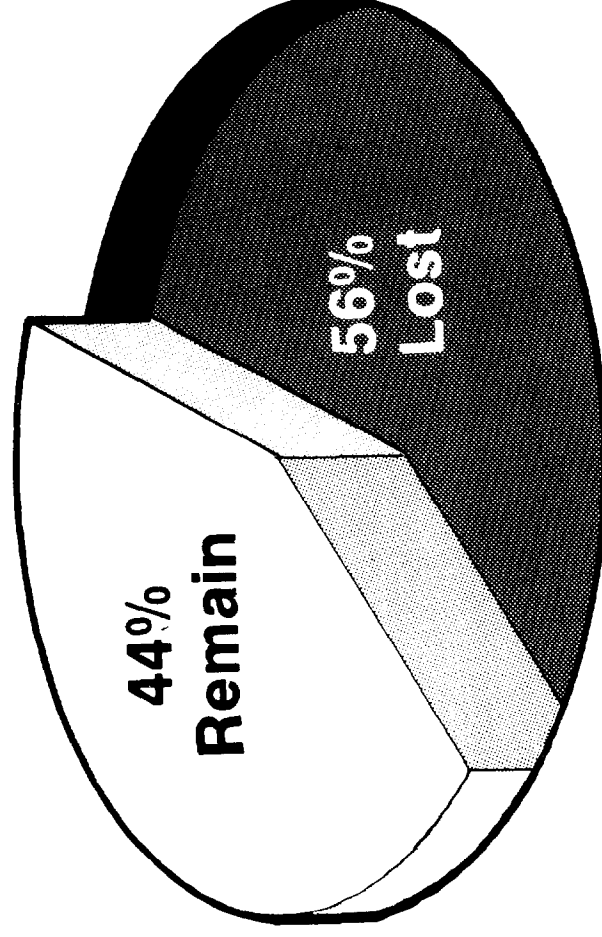
Taken together, these provisions would generate about \$25 million annually in new Federal revenues for wetland protection and would also make available the \$53 million unspent balance in the Wetlands Loan Act.

The legislative proposal announced today is an outgrowth of a private sector -- Protect Our Wetlands and Duck Resources task force -- created by Secretary Watt 8 months ago.

Secretary Watt said the 37-member POWDR task force was comprised of corporate, government and conservation leaders who shared a "concern for the future of our wetlands and waterfowl" and served without pay. "POWDR, in my view, is a perfect example of how dynamic, public-private partnerships can work together for a better America. I am glad to say POWDR will remain an active force in the days and months ahead as we seek to mobilize public, business and governmental support for wetland protection."

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U.S. WETLANDS (LOWER 48)



AVERAGE ANNUAL WETLAND LOSSES MID-50's TO MID-70's

Inland Wetland Losses = 440,000 Acres/Year

Coastal Wetland Losses = 18,000 Acres/Year

Total Annual Loss = 458,000 Acres/Year

U.S. WETLANDS (LOWER 48)

95 MILLION ACRES

